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Graffiti at the Foxtrot Petroglyph Site

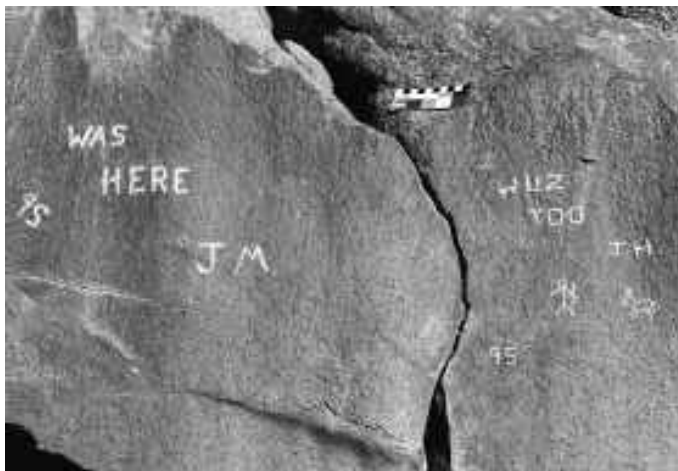
Inhabited by coyotes, jackrabbits, and rattlesnakes and separated from major transportation corridors by the San Bernardino and Little San Bernardino Mountains, the 600,000-acre Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center is located in one of North America's hottest deserts. At first glance it appears to be one of the most desolate places in the world to live, but the evidence is irrefutable. The military installation abounds with prehistoric archeological sites, giving testimony to the centuries it served as home to Native Americans. Among the numerous archeological sites located within the installation boundaries, one of the most well-known is the Foxtrot Petroglyph Site, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center at Twentynine Palms, California. It was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on February 23, 1995. The site consists of a 3-kilometer stretch of lava flow, with four primary concentrations of rock art. Four hundred and ninety rock art panels and over 2,000 design elements have been recorded. Unique features include the presence of both petroglyphs (images pecked or scratched into rock surface) and pictographs (images painted onto rock surface) in the same geographical location as well as style elements characteristic of both the northern Great Basin region and the southern Colorado Desert region. The implication is that the design elements were created by the various Native American cultural groups that occupied or traversed the area during the prehistoric past.

Below, left. Re-integration in progress of both incised and pecked graffiti.

Right. Same panel after re-integration treatment.

Area residents have known about the Petroglyph site since the 1940s. However, it was not until the late 1970s that the Marine Corps became aware of its significance. Since that time, the site has been placed off limits to all military activities. It is, however, accessible and over the years various individuals have left their mark on the site by either carving, scratching, or painting their names, initials, and/or dates onto the rock surface. The majority of the graffiti are carved or incised, but there are a few that have been painted. As graffiti tend to encourage more graffiti, the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center initiated a program to restore the site. The project was funded by the Department of Defense Legacy Resources Management Program, Rock Art Inventory and Protection Project.

The purpose of the restoration and re-integration project was to mask the presence of graffiti at the petroglyph site, thereby removing incentives for additional vandalism. A technique developed by conservators was used to disguise the carved, scratched, and incised graffiti using synthetic acrylic polymer pigments. These have a uniform grain size, which will allow future researchers to distinguish the re-integrated areas from the surrounding rock when examined under magnification. This is important in light of the current techniques being developed for dating rock art. To determine the colors necessary for re-integration, rocks containing graffiti were compared to a Munsell soil color chart. Black, brown, gray, violet, red, yellow, buff, and white pigments were selected and a pointillist-style painting technique was used to fill in the graffiti with enough color to break up the visual impact. The object of re-integration is not to completely cover the graffiti with an exact color match, but to blend it in with the rock surface so that it is less visible. Carved and incised graffiti directly over petroglyphs was not treated. Surrounding areas, however, were re-integrated. Graffiti consisting of very fine scratching was disguised using a highly dilute wash.





The pecked or carved abstract elements of the Foxtrot Petroglyph Site are believed to be of great time depth, generally western Archaic. Several are found with scratched geometric lines superimposed, which appear to be more recent.

A wide variety of curvilinear and rectilinear abstract elements, as well as zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures, are represented at the Foxtrot Petroglyph Site.



All graffiti were photographed before and after treatment. The colors used and the success of the technique were documented for each panel. Success was generally dependent upon the depth of the carved and incised graffiti. Deeper graffiti were more difficult to disguise due to the

associated shadows. With this technique, re-integrated graffiti may be more or less visible depending on the time of day, angle of the sun and/or presence of clouds. The photographic documentation will be used by Marine Corps personnel for monitoring the condition of the panels which were re-integrated to determine both the longevity and the success of the treatment.

Three painted graffiti were found in the same general vicinity at the center of the site, adjacent to a major supply route. Removal of painted graffiti at rock art sites must always be approached with extreme caution, as frequently the solvents available for removal can be detrimental to the rock surface. At the Foxtrot Site, selected solvents were tested on small areas of each painted graffiti to determine the most appropriate solvent to use. The most offensive graffiti, a large green "GLENN '95," had been painted directly over a petroglyph panel. A test poultice was applied using acid free tissue as a buffer between the poultice and the rock surface. The paint was softened to a point at which it could be peeled off with tweezers. Additional poultices were then applied in the same manner to small areas of the graffiti. Plastic wrap was placed over the poultices to retard evaporation, and the poultices were removed at timed intervals. In the areas outside the letters, minute spatters from the spray paint were more difficult to remove, causing a ghosting effect around the letters. Upon completion, a water poultice was applied to treated areas to draw out any solvent remaining on the rock surface. Although it was not possible to remove all the paint using this treatment, after one year the graffiti are considerably less visible.

An important component for any rock art conservation project is to examine why the site was vandalized initially. Some of the graffiti at the Foxtrot Site date back to 1907, long before it was acquired by the Marine Corps. The bulk of the graffiti, however, is relatively recent. Earlier studies of the site by McCarthy (1979) and Hedges and Hamann (1992) made it possible to determine that 17 panels were vandalized between 1979 and 1992. As a result of the re-integration project, nine graffiti dated between 1993-1996 were found, in addition to several undated graffiti not noted by the previous researchers. The majority of the graffiti were found in close proximity to four "off limits" signs which were placed directly in front of the most visible petroglyphs. As these may have been the impetus for some of the graffiti, all four signs were repositioned along the lava flow where there are no petroglyphs to designate the entire area as "off limits." If continued monitoring indicates that sign repositioning has limited or no effectiveness in eliminating vandalism, the next option may be to move the main supply route to the south, away from the rock face on which the petroglyphs occur.

The restoration and re-integration project is an important contribution to preserving the rock art at the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center. During a time when rock art on private and public lands continues to be vandalized, the efforts of the Marine Corps to preserve this cultural resource are laudable. Fortunately, limited public access to an active training base helps conserve significant cultural resources such as the Foxtrot Petroglyph Site; unfortunately, there are still individuals who cannot resist the opportunity to leave their mark where others in the past have left theirs.

References

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